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Readers Come First

Stansfield Turner, the director of Central Intelligence, is said to have been stunned at the vigorous objections by the nation's journalists to his recent statement before the American Society of Newspaper Editors that the CIA reserves the right to employ U.S. newsmen as agents, and, indeed, has done so on three occasions.

Neither his common sense, and that failing, his vast intelligence network has forewarned him that American reporters and cameramen now recognize they cannot be hired spies and journalists simultaneously, that they cannot serve their readers and their government at one and the same time, and that their responsibility is to their readers, first and foremost.

By proclaiming the CIA-media link to the world, Turner cast suspicion on every American reporter abroad. Worse yet, he may have endangered the lives of U.S. journalists working in intrigue-ridden Third World hotspots or in communist countries.

Governments in many of these countries already assume that at least some correspondents sent abroad by American news organizations are also employed on intelligence-gathering errands for the CIA. Never mind that this is flatly incorrect in almost every case. The suspicion lingers, if for no other reason than that Third World dictators and every communist state routinely employ their journalists as spies.

What Turner has done, quite gratuitously, is to lend those suspicions a credence they should never have.

Beyond the director's appalling in-

discretion is the issue of whether American journalists should ever accept a CIA assignment.

Only a fool would argue that no circumstance could ever arise compelling a journalist's involvement in an intelligence operation. If an American correspondent could prevent World War III by delivering a clandestine message to someone in the Kremlin, who would argue that he should refuse?

Nevertheless, it is obvious that journalists can hardly operate as paid spies without hopelessly compromising their reporting responsibilities. This is not to say, however, that journalists cannot or should not maintain a professional relationship with members of the intelligence community. Indeed, foreign correspondents would be derelict if they did not. But seeking information from the CIA, or any other governmental agency, is not the same as being on the federal payroll.

Much of the damage attributable to Turner's gaffe may be irreversible, particularly in the short run. But he could at least limit losses for everybody involved by confessing his error.

What he simply should do is to abide by the CIA policy enunciated in 1976 after revelations the CIA had been employing journalists as undercover agents. That policy clearly states: "The CIA will not enter into any paid or contractual relationship with any full-time or part-time news correspondent accredited by any U.S. news service, newspaper, periodical, radio or television network, or station."